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ABSTRACT

This discussion of the movie "Field of Dreams" analyzes the film's structuring of individual perceptual response to its visual messages, as well as its contribution to our cultural myths using baseball as visual metaphor. The central premises of the film revolve around seeing and reading the visual messages correctly according to the point of view of the protagonist. The movie is specifically about the individual's pursuit of his dreams. The film builds on the distinction between those who can see and believe in the baseball team, and those who cannot. As the audience identifies with those who can see, it watches dreams come true. "Field of Dreams" structures the dream experience of the film on all levels to integrate the audience into its order and its myth, through visual symbols. (Contains 7 references.) (SLD)

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Decoding "Field of Dreams": Movies, Baseball, and the American Dream

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by
Gretchen Bisplinghoff

Hollywood . . . The Dream Factory . . . "the stuff dreams are made of" . . .a FIELD OF DREAMS. Throughout the history of the movies, a recurring visual metaphor for Hollywood and its product has been dreams and dreaming. Film theoreticians have long noted similarities between the individual movie-going experience and the dream state. They have discussed the common elements between the two states that contribute to a heightened impact of film on the individual's psyche. Their discussion focuses on the manner in which film operates on an unconscious level by simulating the dream condition. In his analysis, Parker Tyler refers to "dream symbols," and "the frequently unconscious magic employed by Hollywood--a magic of dream creation that far transcends its literal messages."[1] These dream symbols also operate on the level of the collective. Societal dreams and nightmares are played out on the screen. American culture is reflected and refracted through film's prism of images and icons, which in turn reflects its influence.

Hollywood has often used the game of baseball as a continuing motif to depict a particular view of America, its dreams and values: ". . . baseball lends itself to symbolism and myth like no other sport. Using baseball to somehow define ourselves and/or our country is an undeniable lure. . . ."[2] There has been a recent upsurge in baseball films--with BULL DURHAM, EIGHT MEN OUT, MAJOR LEAGUE, THE BABE, MR. BASEBALL, and especially, the hit movie of 1989, FIELD OF DREAMS. FIELD is about dreams on both the individual and collective levels. This discussion of FIELD OF DREAMS will analyze the film's structuring of individual perceptual response to its visual messages, as well as its unique contribution to our cultural myths using baseball as visual metaphor. The central premises of the film revolve around seeing; reading the visual messages "correctly," according to the protagonist's point of view.

DREAMING

On an individual level, our response to the film experience can be compared to the experience of dreaming. Our relaxed state, surrounding conditions and responses suggest correlations. These correlations have been noted and studied for their significance. Jean-Louis Baudry points out that: "A parallel between dream and cinema had often been noticed: common sense perceived it right away. The cinematographic projection is remi-

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niscent of dream, would appear to be a kind of dream, really a dream, a parallelism often noticed by the dreamer when, about to describe his dream, he is compelled to say "'It was like in a movie. . . .'"[3] He goes on to discuss his interpretation of the corresponding elements (particularly concerning the visual images) of dream and film. A summary of these features include: "1. The dream apparatus has the following features: inhibition of movement; lack of reality testing; an imagistic medium; a dark room; projection; a screen; a more-than-real impression of reality; a tendency to efface the distinction between perception and representation. 2. The cinematic apparatus has exactly the same features noted in premise 1."[4]

FIELD OF DREAMS is specifically about an individual's pursuit of his dreams. Through careful structuring of perception, his dream becomes the audience's. It's important to foreground this connection to see how this then becomes a part of the audience's collective experience of the dream and the vision of the American Dream that it imparts. The film structures perception and reception of this vision through literalizing the idea that "seeing is believing." Early in the film, Ray Kinsella (Kevin Costner) comes down in the morning to find his daughter Karen watching the film HARVEY on television as she eats her breakfast. Jimmy Stewart's character is describing how he met his friend Harvey, an invisible six foot rabbit. Kinsella turns the television off. When she protests that the film is funny, he replies: "No, it's not. The man is sick, very sick." This harsh response to the earlier film's central fantasy immediately establishes the fact that Kinsella is not the type of person to see things that aren't there; that would be crazy, and he's a practical man with normal perceptions of reality.

The film thus sets up his character and outlook as trustworthy--this credibility is important because the opening segment shows him rejecting his family and going to college at Berkeley during the height of the sixties. The segment uses a series of stills with Ray's voice-over to encapsulate his life: growing up as an only child first with his parents, then with his father as a single parent, then meeting and marrying Annie who convinced him to buy a farm. In the last line of the voice-over, he says: "Until I heard the voice, I'd never done a crazy thing in my whole life." He's a child of the counter culture who has become an Iowa farmer, but his responses should clearly be perceived as normal by the audience before the dream quest begins. His response to HARVEY also characterizes his quest as serious, not a frivolous flight of fancy. Throughout the rest of the film, he talks about being crazy, but this is thus never a serious issue for the audience.

"REALITY"

In addition, this early scene points out another difference in the positioning of the audience. In HARVEY, only Elwood Dowd can see the rabbit. He is invisible to the other characters and to the audience. The audience therefore chooses whether to share the protagonist's vision. However, the audience shares Ray Kinsella's perceptions from the start. First, only Ray and the audience hear the voice that tells him: "If you build it, he will come." More importantly, when he decides what these words mean and looks out into the cornfield, both he and the audience see a ballpark as a shared interpretation of the message. And, so there is

no mistake, this vision appears twice. Twice the audience sees Ray looking, and twice the lights literally come on as the ballpark appears. Then Shoeless Joe appears, in uniform, in medium close up, looking over his shoulder at the camera.

Ray builds the baseball diamond; the film documents the transformation from cornfield to baseball field. The baseball park becomes a concrete reality for all the characters, especially his shocked neighbors, and the audience. However, when Shoeless Joe Jackson and other members of the scandal-plagued 1919 White Sox team start coming out of a cornfield "land beyond" death and playing on the field, only certain people can see them. Only Ray, and those who believe in his vision, can see the players, and that includes the audience. These players are clearly visible to the audience from the beginning; they aren't ghostly or transparent in appearance (except when they re-enter the "other" world). They are a reality for the audience, played by flesh and blood actors. When Karen meets Joe she asks if he's a ghost and he asks what she thinks. She says: "You look real to me." He replies: "Then I guess I'm real."

"SEEING IS BELIEVING"

The rest of the film builds upon this distinction between those who can see and thus believe ("seeing is believing") and those who can't. Those who need further evidence of the truth of Ray's quest, like Terence Mann and Ray's brother-in-law Mark, are literally convinced by visions. Once they see these visions, each more miraculous than the last, they join Ray. Terence Mann resists all of Kinsella's arguments until he also sees a message that flashes on an electronic scoreboard. However, when he doesn't acknowledge right away that he saw the message about the ballplayer "Moonlight" Graham ("You didn't see that?"), Ray gives up on him because he's "lost his passion." When he does acknowledge the message, Ray repeats "You saw it" three times, and indicates that they (--and the audience of course) were the only ones who saw it. Mann then joins Kinsella on the trip to get Graham, confirms his belief when he sees Shoeless Joe, and finally becomes the spokesman for the meaning of Kinsella's vision. Mark is the central figure of resistance throughout the film. He can't see the players. He and his partners hold title to the farm and threaten to foreclose if Ray doesn't sell. At the end of the film, Mark attacks Ray and Karen is injured in the scuffle. Mark is converted to Ray's way of seeing when "Moonlight" Graham steps off the field where he was an invisible (to Mark) rookie player to become Doc Graham (who has been dead for twenty years), and saves Karen's life. Mark watches, stunned, and then asks: "When did these ballplayers get here?" Then he immediately says: "DO NOT sell the farm, Ray. Don't sell the farm."

Because the audience has identified with Ray's mission from the beginning through structuring of their perceptions, they label characters according to whether they also see the players. Characters who don't see as Ray and the audience do are perceived as negative. They aren't perceived as having another, equally legitimate point of view; they are wrong. Until he is "converted," Terence Mann is antisocial, misanthropic and, at one point, literally threatens Ray's life. Mark is trying to help his sister's family in the way that makes sense under normal circumstances. But, because he literally can't see the importance of the farm on

Ray's "higher" level, he is in constant conflict with the family and assumes the role of the villain in the eyes of the audience. This is reinforced at the end of the film when Mark apparently causes an accident which nearly kills Karen. His denial nearly has fatal consequences. In the context of the film's structure, only Ray's (and the audience's) steadfast belief in his vision has brought a ghost doctor back from the dead to save his daughter's life at that moment.

However, it is in fact Ray's fault that his daughter was on those bleachers and almost killed. His vision put her there and caused the conflict, and his physical reaction to Mark causes Mark to let go of her. However, in this climactic vision, the audience and Ray are vindicated in their belief in a tangible "real" (off the field) way for the first time. And, like the progression in leaps of faith, the payoffs for the believers now fall into place in levels of increasing magnitude. Terence Mann is invited to join the ballplayers on the other side. As a writer and former baseball fanatic, this is the fulfillment of his dreams. Ray finally realizes the dream that the field represents on a personal level for him; the return of his dead father in the youthful prime of his baseball career before Ray was born, and the reconciliation of the estranged father and son. As the two play catch, the camera pulls back in an overhead shot to reveal the headlights of a society drawn to this field ("they don't know why") to fulfill their collective dreams (for which they'll pay $20 each).

IMPLICATIONS

The process of identification and seeing and sharing correctly has been built in gradually widening influence through the film, from one individual sharing his vision with other individuals both onscreen and within the audience, to its broader effect on the society onscreen and off. At the end of the film, one man's dream is everyone's dream. However, one man's dream has also become everyone's reality. But what are the implications of this dream? What images are being accepted as the American Dream? Mann says that America has been "erased," but baseball remains the one constant; it's part of our innocent past as children and as a nation. It "reminds us of all that once was good and will be again" in this country. It's important to note that the meaning of "good" is not explicitly defined verbally, it is demonstrated visually, just as the ultimate meaning of Ray's vision is explained through images, not in dialogue.

The audience watches dreams come true on the field--those of the players, of Mann, Graham and Kinsella. They see their dreams represented by a young, innocent, all-male, all-white baseball world; a world untouched by scandal, assassination, integration, the Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Movement. This world represents "all that once was good and will be again"--before the struggle and growth of the years after 1919, especially during and after the sixties. The audience sees only white males playing the game; only males have their dreams fulfilled. Literally only men can go on the field to play or into the cornfield beyond; females, however supportive, cheer from the sidelines. And this is clearly part of the vision: "Asked if there is a Heaven, the spirit of Ray's father replies, 'It's the place dreams come true.' Ray looks at the farmhouse and his wife and child, and says, 'Maybe this is Heaven.'"[5] (Note: This is a long shot of

the gleaming white farmhouse on a hill at sunset, with Ray's wife and daughter sitting on the front porch swing as he fulfills his dreams on the field.) Thus, though the film is structured to represent society's dreams, a return to its vision would, in fact, exclude a large portion of the population.

A GAME OF CATCH

Male bonding, particularly between father and son, takes place through the game: "Shoeless Joe and Ray feel each other out, not with words but with fungoes and BP."[6] Fathers and sons reconcile with a game of catch. Ray rebelled against his father by refusing to become a baseball player. He refused to play ball with his father literally and metaphorically: a rebellion against father and society. He says to Mann: "Can you believe that? An American boy refusing to have a catch with his father?" Ray's father died before Ray was able to apologize or tell him that he loved him. His quest is resolved by the film in their nonverbal game of catch. However, this too represents reinforcement of traditional values and gender roles, of men who don't express themselves openly through words, but use a handshake and a game of catch to say "I love you." The game of catch as visual symbol of father-son bonding appears throughout mass media images of television and film. (Recent examples include DAD and THE NATURAL.)

However, FIELD makes a shift in the meaning of this visual symbol. FIELD OF DREAMS assigns values to the roles of fathers and sons within this visual icon. This reconciliation takes place between unequals: a young, innocent father and his penitent son. The "good son" plays catch with his father. Good sons and good fathers are now instantly identifiable solely on the basis of their participation in the symbolic game and use of its icons. In HOOK, the now grown up Peter Pan spends too much time on his work and not enough time with his children. But the scene that identifies him as a bad father occurs when he misses his son's Little League game (and his son strikes out). He arrives to an empty field; his son can't forgive him. Hook becomes a good father to the boy when he gives him a second chance, a dream come true--a baseball game with Hook in attendance and the winning home run. Hook catches the winning gameball literally in front of the disguised Peter's face and presents it to his "new" son. The baseball operates as a visual icon of their bonding and the correct path to reach it.

Popular culture icons are "visual representations of our myths" which possess "the power to provide a sense of meaningful order and to integrate the personality of the viewer into that order."[7] FIELD OF DREAMS carefully structures the dream experience of the film on all levels to integrate the audience into its order, its myth. As it accomplishes this through visual symbols, it is critical to understand the operation of these icons in order to understand how such a film shapes our culture.

ENDNOTES

[1]Parker Tyler, "Magic and Myth of the Movies," in *Film Theory and Criticism*, Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen and Leo Braudy, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 729.

[2]K. M. Chanko, "Field of Dreams," *Films in Review*, 40 (August/September, 1989), 421.

[3]Jean-Louis Baudry, "The Apparatus: Metapsychological Approaches to the Impression of Reality in the Cinema," in *Film Theory and Criticism*, Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen and Leo Braudy, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 698.

[4]Noel Carroll, "Jean-Louis Baudry and The Apparatus," in *Film Theory and Criticism*. Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen and Loe Braudy, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 712.

[5]Pauline Kael, "Fascination," *The New Yorker*, 65 (May 1, 1989), 77.

[6]Stephen Wulf, "Diamond In The Rough," *Sports Illustrated*, 70 (May 1, 1989), 81.

[7]Michael Real, *Super Media* (Newbury Park, California: Sage Publications, 1989), 109.